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Plan to coordinate U.S. aid to rebels said under review

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By Alfonso Chardy
Inquirer Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — Reagan administration officials are debating the possibility of opening a "freedom fighters bureau" to coordinate U.S. support for anti-communist insurgents around the world — including the Nicaraguan *contras*, administration sources say.

If President Reagan approves such a plan, the United States could conceivably end up funding or endorsing the activities of about 325,000 guerrillas in seven Marxist-ruled countries — Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Laos, Mozambique and Nicaragua.

And if the United States funds them all, the cost could run as high as $1 billion a year, according to congressional computer projections based on current funding for Afghan and Cambodian rebels.

Administration sources said the project received impetus from a June 2 summit of pro-U.S. rebels in Jamba, Angola, and recent congressional votes renewing aid to the *contras*, lifting a ban on aid to Angolan rebels and approving additional funding for the Cambodians.

Nevertheless, sources said, creation of a coordinating agency is a long way away. First, Congress must complete action on restoring aid for the *contras*, a process that began last week in a House-Senate conference committee.

There is also a lack of consensus within the administration about the need for such an agency, sources said, and disagreements over whether to back all anti-communist rebels. Debate has also arisen over whether to put the coordinating office in the CIA, the Pentagon, the State Department or the National Security Council.

Administration moderates argue, said sources, that supporting rightist rebels everywhere would equate the United States with the Soviet Union, which supports many leftist movements. Such support would further exacerbate tensions with Moscow, moderates were reported to contend, drain the U.S. Treasury and dilute support for the Nicaraguans.

But those supporting the idea argue that the United States should put its money where its mouth is. They note that although Reagan espouses the anti-Soviet fighters' cause, the administration has given little or no money to any rebels except the Afghans, Cambodians and Nicaraguans. In Mozambique, they point out, the State Department even supports the Marxist regime.

They also say the United States should counter Soviet support for insurgencies because the rebels are a part of a worldwide war between the superpowers.

"This is not an undeclared war," said CIA director William J. Casey in a May 1 speech in New York, referring to Moscow's support for leftist insurgencies. "In 1961, Khruschev ... told us that communism would win not through nuclear war, which could destroy the world, or conventional war, which could quickly lead to nuclear war, but through wars of national liberation in Africa, Asia and Latin America."

The debate may result in creation of a "freedom fighters bureau" if only because the White House will need to coordinate the work of all agencies that may be providing various forms of support to rebel groups over the next few years, sources said.

Spokesmen for the White House, the State Department and the Pentagon said they were not aware of plans for a freedom fighters office. But CIA spokeswoman Patti Volz indicated the spy agency knew about it.

"As to whether the administration is planning to set up a freedom fighters bureau," she said, "it's not up to the CIA to comment. If they, indeed, intend to do such a thing it would be up to the White House to comment."

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